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SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN MEDIA THEMES, January 17-23.

1. Summary: Media focus this past week was mainly on domestic issues. A visit by Vice President Cheney prompted discussion of issues that have already been controversial in the press, including the U.S.s intentions toward the region and Iranian nuclear proliferation. Reports in the U.S. media that the FTA negotiations have stalled raised the ire of some commentators against the U.S., but also seemed to prompt more reflection on Egypts role in the region, and the potential for progress in the Arab and Islamic worlds. Interestingly, there was only one commentary and little substantive news coverage of the Iraqi elections. End summary.

2. Free Trade Agreement hanging fire: Vice President Cheney's visit to Cairo coincided with news reports in the U.S. media, picked up by local ones, that progress on the FTA negotiations would be linked to advances on the political liberalization front. Editorials ensued in many papers, including Egypt's two largest pro-government papers, Al-Ahram (circ. 750,000) and Al-Akhbar (800,000), using the visit to highlight Egypts importance to the U.S., and to caution the U.S. administration not to take Egypt for granted. On January 21, the editor-in-chief of Al-Akhbars weekly edition, Akhbar Al-Yom, criticized American voices that "threaten to cut off assistance or the FTA talks" as being "indifferent to the status of Egypt and its role as a leader of the Islamic and Arab world and a factor for peace in the region." The editor countered that an FTA "would serve the U.S. as well as Egypt. Nevertheless, the U.S. should recognize that shared interests between the two countries do not mean that Egypt would disregard its national interests." The editor-in-chief of Al-Ahram published three editorials in the past week, all commenting positively on the Vice Presidents visit and the strength of the relationship, while cautioning the U.S. in the same vein. For example, on January 20, he noted that the visit reflected a "noticeable development in bilateral relations and that although differences in opinion exist, the U.S. has come to realize Egypt's wisdom." He concluded that "the U.S. should remember that reform comes from within, not from foreign pressure, but that the U.S. can assist other nations to achieve democracy."

4. Introspection on the role of Islam in the world: Some commentators in the past week looked more closely at the prevailing mindset in the Arab and Islamic worlds, and the ability of this region to re-define itself and make progress. Three Al-Ahram columnists wrote about Islam and the lack of progress in the Arab world on Jan. 21 alone. The first provided statistics showing that 80 percent of the Arab population is conservative politically and religiously and has reservations about reform and democracy, while 19 percent are reformists and 1 percent extremist. The columnist opined that "the 19 percent of reformists should be supported lest they join the first or last groups." He also called for the "incorporation of moderate Islamic and political groups in the battle against violence and extremism." The second criticized Arab silence over the rising "Islamaphobia" in the west, and the third remarked that the fatal stampede in the Hajj "happened because Muslim minds are dominated by the culture of extremism and fanaticism." There were also negative reactions to the Bin Laden tape aired on Al-Jazeera TV, such as Salah Eissa who lashed out in the medium circulation (70-90,000) opposition daily, Al-Wafd against Bin Laden for not serving Arab interests but rather those of the U.S., and that he had not sought the opinion of the Arab people when he committed the September 11 operations." The article concluded by ridiculing Bin Laden's call for a truce.

5. Iranian nukes: During the past week, columnists and editors continued their debate over Iran's nuclear intentions and the world's reaction thereto. A Jan. 19 editorial by small circulation (20,000) independent weekly, Nahdet Masr's editor-in-chief reflected how the Iranian nuclear issue, and the potential global response to it, has caused a defensive reaction in many Egyptians. The article simultaneously blamed the U.S. for looking for more military action in the region, blamed Israel's possession of nuclear weapons as the impetus for Irans building up its own capability, and declared that nobody wants a region with nuclear weapons at all. The article concluded that the U.S. simply wants to protect Israel. Al-Akhbar's Ibrahim Seida, on the same day, criticized the Iranian president for being more concerned about his television image than

with the "escalating global animosity against him."
Almost all commentators and editors concluded that the escalation of tensions between Iran and the international community could have devastating effects on the entire region. As expressed in Al-Ahram's unsigned editorial of January 19, "a peaceful resolution is needed, as the whole region is entangled and inflamed."
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